Images

The exterior of The Work Shed, two humble sheds at Yarralumla, which are still there. Photo: Max Bourke, 2012.

An image of the important records in a ledger started by Weston and digitised by the ACT Branch of the Australian Garden History Society in 2008. Photo: Max Bourke, 2012.

History

The Work Shed at Yarralumla in Canberra saw much experimentation in both species selection and propagation techniques. This work was undertaken and supervised in the early years by TCG (Charles) Weston (1866-1935), the first Afforestation Officer of the Federal Capital Commission. The Work Shed is part of the original historic Yarralumla Nursery established in 1914 as a permanent nursery and trial arboretum to test the suitability of plantings to establish Canberra as a garden city.

Work started at the Nursery at Yarralumla 1914, following from Charles Weston’s, the first Superintendent, recommendation that the Nursery move to Yarralumla. The first plant was produced in 1916. The production Nursery occupied more than 28 hectares (70 acres). Until the early 1970s some of this area was used for the ACT Parks and Gardens research department and Department of Health’s plant quarantine. Another 130 hectares (330 acres) was to be used for various permanent plantings. This larger area became part of Westbourne Woods (now Royal Canberra Golf course) and Weston Park.

Weston was born in England and apprenticed at the age of 13 to a head gardener at Poyle Manor. His real breakthrough came though when he spent eight years in his twenties as a gardener under the well known David Thompson at Drumlanrig Castle in Scotland. Here apprentices were expected in the great manner of the Scottish self-improvement schemes, to study everything from biology to politics. Thomson advised his staff to “…observe, experiment, learn…” all their life. Weston studied not only plant propagation and management but also plant breeding.

Weston arrived in Sydney in 1896. From 1898 until 1913 Weston worked under the direction of the Director of the Sydney Royal Botanic Garden, Joseph Maiden, and despite a few disagreements over pay, Maiden clearly held Weston in the highest regard, both promoting him internally and supporting his move to the Federal Capital. Joseph Maiden described him as the “greatest “ geneticist of his time (although he used the term “Mendelian”, as the word ‘geneticist’ was not used for another 40 years).

In 1911, as Federal Capital Commission Afforestation Officer, Weston was the first horticultural officer to work with Walter Burley Griffin in developing Canberra. He did not work directly to Griffin, and indeed had a number of disagreements with him, but nevertheless Weston tried to accommodate Griffin’s design ideas and, where possible, many of his planting suggestions. Weston’s role as a plant breeder, propagator and innovator was to explore the cultivars and species able to grow in the new capital.

Through his work at Yarralumla Nursery, Weston gave ‘Canberra - the Bush Capital’ its “Bush” in many senses. It is estimated that Yarralumla Nursery has grown over 50 million plants in its 100 year history.*
The “free plants scheme” whereby all new householders were entitled to a gift of a certain number of plants from this nursery has shaped the visual appearance of Canberra, if only through the species given away.

Weston kept detailed records of his seed store in large elephant folio registers. These historic records were stored in wooden filing cabinets at Yarralumla Nursery. In 2012 the Australian Garden History Society, under the Chairmanship of Tony Byrne and with active management by Ms Nancy Clarke produced a digital record, now online.

* - At present, 400,000 plants are being produced each year. About 1,100 species are propagated of which approximately 50% are Australian natives and 50% are exotic.

**Description of Place**

*The Work Shed* at the Yarralumla Nursery comprises two sheds, which were amongst the earliest buildings. The sheds are extant and are simple timber clad structures with galvanised iron roofs. They contain a rich resource of seeds from around the world used in the propagation of plants for public and private spaces.

**Significance**

It is as a direct result of the research undertaken at the original ‘Yarralumla Nursery’ that Canberra today has developed its unique character and identity as a garden city with lakeside public amenity. The early planting of Canberra with species trialled here formed a crucial cultural phase in the early history of the ACT in attempts to beautify the nation’s capital. The Yarralumla Nursery (with Weston Park and Westbourne Woods) is unique within the Australian context for its diversity of native and exotic species and grouped plantings, and it is one of the oldest and largest collections of this type in Australia outside of traditional botanic gardens.

The Work Shed is significant as it is the key area in which the research and propagation work which underpin the significance of Yarralumla Nursery occurred. The Work Shed is also significant for its association with Charles Weston, who was involved in the development of the Yarralumla Nursery, and who carried out the early plant experimentation that allowed the Nursery to play the role it did in the development of Canberra. Charles Weston is significant in his own right as one of the greatest plant geneticists of his time. The historical records of Weston’s work, which survive and are significant in their own right, contribute to the significance of the Work Shed, and Yarralumla Nursery more generally.

**Current Listing**

The *Yarralumla Nursery* as a whole is listed on the ACT Heritage Register. The listing includes the early works sheds and office.

**Further Reading**

Dr Lenore Coltheart, ‘*Nursery Tales for a Garden City: The Historical Context of the Records at Canberra’s Yarralumla Nursery*’ (this article provides historical and social context for the records, positioning the Nursery and its records within the story of the development and planning of Canberra as both Garden City and City of Gardens).

**Author Information**

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Information provided 16th April 2020.